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Educators Told School Records A Threat to Students' Privacy

By ROBERT STRUNK

MORRISVILLE — The threat to privacy inherent in the collection and distribution of confidential data about students by schools was the subject of a panel discussion at a Wednesday meeting of the Vermont Personnel and Guidance Association. Gathering at the Charlemont Restaurant for the final meeting of the school year, 20 members of the VPGA were warned that while the release of information concerning a student's academic performance and character is necessary, it must be done in a way that considers the student's right to personal privacy.

The panel, composed of William Rochon, director of pupil personnel services for the Barre City Schools; Robert Rowe, assistant director of admissions for Champlain College; Norman Bartlett, field representative for the Vermont Education Association; and Edward Ellmendorf, pupil personnel services, Johnson State College, stressed the dangers in the indiscriminate release of information from a student's record. The panel was unanimous in asserting that a student and his parents or guardian must be made aware of exactly what information is in such records.

The educators felt that so long as the student and the parent were aware of what the files contained, and if the information was not of an irrelevant or incriminating nature, such information could be released to properly identified parties under certain conditions.

Ellmendorf, noting that Johnson State College is close to Canada, said that inquiries from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Central Intelligence Agency, "were more than infrequent." But, he added, "Agents provide ample

identification and do not force the issue if we decline comment on a particular student."

Ellmendorf said that Johnson State College adheres to policies formulated by the Committee on Records Management and Transcript Adequacy of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers.

In two areas of sensitivity, disclosure to government agencies and disclosure in response to telephone inquiries, detailed procedures govern the release of information, he said, and in both cases the students and the parent are made aware that an inquiry is being made.

In both areas, only material that would be considered public record is released, he declared.

Ellmendorf said that these procedures are maintained in spite of a certain "contractual agreement" entered into by the student with the college when he signs his enrollment application. That application, said Ellmendorf, contains a declaration on the student's part that the information he is presenting is "true and accurate" and the college is authorized to handle the information in the application "as it sees fit."

The panel and the other members of VPGA present agreed that all information not of an academic nature or dealing directly with a student's educational performance should be destroyed "soon after graduation."

It was brought out that the Russell Sage Foundation, in a survey of 54 school districts, found current practice governing access to information favors school personnel and outside agencies over students and parents.

Of the 54 schools polled, it was reported 43 allow teachers to use all the files; 31 also make the records available to the principal; 23 allow the files to be openly inspected by the

FBI and the CIA; 23 give the records, without subpoena, to juvenile courts; 18 districts gave the record to local police.

Only 8 districts allowed the parents to see the records of their own children and only 3 districts allowed the student that right.

The VPGA panel and members felt that these statistics were not a true picture of procedures and practices being followed in Vermont.

One woman guidance counselor, asking that her name not be used, received several nods of agreement when she remarked, "The rights of privacy accrue to all of us — not just the student — and I feel that we are the first line of defense in the protection of those rights."